

The Buddha's Enlightenment: Touching The Earth

Synopsis: When Prince Siddhartha Gautama was twenty-nine he was struck by the reality of aging, sickness, and death, then caught a glimpse of the Path. He left his palace, entered the forests and mountains and never looked back. After six years of austerities, near death, a skeleton wound with sinews and veins, he remembers a festival from childhood when he'd dropped self-centeredness and experienced samadhi. He realizes if he'd glimpsed the Way as well-fed child, starvation can't be the path to enlightenment. He eats an offering of milk rice. His five ascetic disciples leave him. He throws his bowl onto the river: "If this is the day of Supreme Enlightenment, may it float upstream!" The bowl forges upstream. Arriving at the Bodhi-tree he announces, "Though only skin, sinews, and bones remain and my blood and flesh dry up and wither away, I won't leave until I've attained Full Enlightenment." Visions arise. The three daughters of Mara try to seduce him. Mara's demon army whirls upon him. Mara approaches and in the voice of Gautama's innerness, asks: "Are you worthy of coming to supreme enlightenment?" The Future Buddha touches the Earth, asking the Earth to witness. The Earth replies, "He is worthy! There is not a spot on the Earth where he has not already offered himself to the attainment of Enlightenment and the welfare of all beings!" Mara, his army and daughters flee. The Future Buddha continues into deeper practice. With the dawn he glances at the Morning Star and finds enlightenment, exclaiming, "Wonder of wonders! All beings are Buddhas, endowed with wisdom and virtue! Only their delusions prevent them from attesting to it."

Enlightenment is both the goal and the ordinary, beating heart of Zen. Gaining calm and experiencing peaceful sitting is good. Just look at the madness of our world if you doubt it. But if calm were all Siddhartha were looking for, he didn't have to leave home. He could have visited any local forest retreat. "Get your calm on here!" The billboards were up all over the place.

It wasn't enough. Having personally experienced impermanence, the insubstantiality of every person and thing, a fire was lit in his mind, heart, and gut. After that he had no choice. He had to keep going until he touched solid ground. Here's something we can take to heart – wherever we are, whatever we may have realized or *not* realized we can keep going. The essence, as has been said of genius is 1% inspiration, 99% perspiration.

We do the work. Then we keep doing the work. Kensho, touching the ground of Mind, is not the end of the road but a beginning. It's like realizing, "Ah. Here's the ground!" Then we continue our journey knowing that real ground is under our feet.

In many jatakas the Bodhisattva wakes to the reality of selflessness, the identity of form and emptiness, relative and Absolute; to non-dual True-Nature. In the jatakas this is called "Insight." These are milestone moments to be sure, but not full realization of original Buddhahood. In past jataka lives Prince Siddhartha had been a spiritual teacher, a lay practitioner, ordained practitioner, hermit monk, community leader, wandering sadhu, businessman, family man, carpenter, juggler, robber, ox-herder, farmer, caravan leader – the list is almost endless. He had countless lives committed to basic ethical practice whether as human, god, or animal. Buddhist tradition says whatever challenging life situation he faced, whatever heights he reached or depths he sounded, he always chose to go further, over the next hill, beyond the next river, through the next dark forest. Not ignoring a problem, not satisfied with a milestone he actualized the Great Way, literally, "maha-yana." Onward, further, was his nature as it is our own. This is why the Tao is called "the Way," or "the Path." Practice realization is not static, but a road continuing endlessly.

Zen reveres the story of the Buddha's enlightenment because it reveals our own potential, even as it shows the work, the perseverance and dedication necessary. The Buddha has his Christ-on-the-Cross moment when he discovers that his willful asceticism hasn't actually clarified a thing, but only left him in a dark, useless place. And though the ex-Prince sat and sat, in the end, just sitting wasn't enough; there was a trigger to realization. It didn't just come from looking within. It could have been a word, a sound, or anything. He was ripe, his mind empty of habitual limits when he glanced up and saw the morning

star. *AHA!* “Gone, gone, entirely gone!” Completely clear! A morning star sat beneath the tree. No seeing is real seeing. No one sitting is genuine sitting. Just star! *Star!*

But even before that the Buddha-to-Be wasn't just sitting like a frog. He was poised, alert as a cat before a mouse hole. When Mara challenged, he responded. He didn't get caught up but he didn't ignore it. When situations arise in our lives we can't go off and sit until they're gone. There is a time to act. It need not be a big deal. In fact, it would be wise not to make it – whatever it is – a big deal. The Buddha simply touched the Earth and asked the Earth to witness for him. He didn't try to muster reasons and out-argue Mara. He did what was just enough.

Mara was no slouch and knew how to hit a nerve. Perhaps self-doubt is what all obstacles come down to. Yasutani Roshi said that if it wasn't for some form of not giving ourselves fully to the inquiry, holding back and doubting in a not useful way, we'd all have been enlightened ages ago. When people are passed on an initial koan they can fall into again into doubt. “What? Can it be? Really? That's it?” they may think as old habits return. The voice of Mara is ancient and universal. It need not be an obstacle. It's simply another Dharma Gate we vow to wake to. We're all in the same boat, all members of the same “one nose/two eye-hole” society. The Buddha was no different.

Buddhist tradition says that we all have the nature of Buddha, exactly the same vast empty nature of endlessly creative potential as Shakyamuni and all previous and future Buddhas. From the first we are each fully and equally endowed with wisdom and compassion. And because it is already who we are, *if* we practice, *if* we make the effort then we, too, can, to one degree or another awake to our own Original Mind. Of course, enlightenment is not a “thing,” we “get.” If anything, it comes from losing not gaining, losing the habitual self-centered “stuff” that cuts us off from wind, rain, sun, moon, stars,

trees, animals, people. With that wonderful failure, that liberating loss, we find intimacy, which is what we've been seeking for who knows how long. Enlightenment is a name given to our being able to attest to our original, unblemished intimacy with sun, moon, stars, wind, rain, snow, clouds, trash, bugs, cats, rivers, mountains, trees, people. We do not gain it, because it has never been lost. Like the ground, it has always been here. We just didn't have the steadiness to see. Of course, it's not that "I" become intimate with everything. Rather the so-called 10,000 things step in and replace me. I'm gone. Intimacy is that intimate! As the Prajna Paramita says, "No eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, mind."

Zen asks, "Ok, if we are this enlightened nature, then where is it? And why don't we know it?" In zazen we bore into such questions like a thirsty person drilling for water. A sonar survey – the life of the Buddha, the jatakas, Zen teaching – show us that water is there. We have a map, not blind belief. This map reveals that all the water we'll need is already beneath our feet. So we keep at it. We enter a zendo. We sit. We hear teisho, go to dokusan, experience breath, count breath, explore koan points, examine precepts.

The Buddha, the ex-Prince, as the jatakas tell it, touched the Earth after lifetimes of practice. For many people it may not be until years of practice after initial milestones that the gate really opens and they *Know*. Still, the Buddha's enlightenment, tradition holds, was unique. It was complete, every level of character and mind fully realized. And it was so because of the lifetimes of work that preceded it. In substance, every kensho, the small kind we're likely to realize and the Buddha's own great enlightenment are the same. But in content they are vastly different. Buddhist mythos says that in this World Age no one experienced more deeply than Shakyamuni because no one had worked so hard or so long to prepare the ground. He touched not only the ground but the bottomless bottom and topless heights. Comparing our realization to his would be like comparing the finger painting of a kindergartener to work by Rembrandt or Picasso. The substance is the same.

Both are paintings. But the degree of conscious realization is vastly different. Yet we all begin somewhere and for the kindergartner that finger-painting is just as meaningful as Rembrandt's work was for him.

The Buddha's story, his home leaving and forest path exertions, his abandonment by his disciples and his solitary encounter with Mara, the primordial force of his and our innate ignorance, completes his many lifetime Path. Touching the Earth, he gets up and walks on, transcending the final temptation to sit at ease in his long-sought, hard-won pavilion of complete enjoyment, freedom, wisdom, and peace. Instead, he devotes his next fifty years of life to walking the dusty roads, teaching those who while in reality as complete and whole as he, don't know it. He goes back into the chaos of the ten thousand things, at peace with it all, a half smile on his lips. How could this be? Case # 37 *Shoyoroku (Book of Serenity)* throws some light here:

Kuei-shan (Isan) asked Yang-shan (Kyozan), "Suppose a man asks you, 'How about one who says all sentient beings are in a disorderly karmic consciousness, and have no base to rely upon.' How would you treat him?"

Yang-Shan (Kyozan) said, "If a man appears, I call to him. When he turns his head, instantly I say, 'What is that?' I wait while he hesitates, and then I say to him, 'There is not only disorderly karmic consciousness, but there is no base to rely upon.'"

Kuei-shan (Isan) said, "Oh, good."

But just prior to the Buddha's enlightenment, after six years of exhaustive effort, (and kalpas of jataka practice-exertions), going the limit, trying with all he had, drawing on the power of his own countless efforts, failures, and triumphs, Mara, the Buddhist Tempter or Distracter, the inner voice of ego, appears. To turn the once sheltered ex-prince from his Goal, Mara draws his ace in the hole – self-doubt. He asks, "How could a sheltered ex-

prince like you be worthy of the Goal? Better men and women than you have tried and failed. You're young, a beginner. Give it time. You've got the basic ability, but now? No way. Back off! Take it slow." It's a reasonable request, and reasonable advice, devilishly reasonable. "Take it easy. Be careful. Go slow and steady. Prepare. Reduce attachments and ego-concerns. Be humble. Don't be hasty."

At this crucial juncture, with worlds in the balance, Siddhartha doesn't waste breath arguing with the habit voice of his own separateness, his own predilection towards egotism. He doesn't even try to put together a reasonable counter-argument. To enter the fray is to have already lost. "Ready? Not ready? A self that gains? A self that loses? A self that has It? A self that doesn't?" He doesn't get sucked into Mara's metaphor at all. Instead, maybe he smiled and shook his head in pity for old Mara, then reached down and touched the Earth asking Her to witness. And the Earth replied with hundreds of thousands of voices, voices of furrows and graves, youth and age, man, woman, child, animals, plants, rivers, and stones all speaking as One. "Interbeing," to use Thich Nhat Hanh's lovely term, awakes, and Mara is overwhelmed. His last effort to tempt the Buddha-to-Be to cling to a limited view is crushed.

Jataka tales are the record of the Buddha's practice history. It is said to be a particularly long history going back eons, world ages, Big Bangs. According to Buddhist tradition we, too, have our own jataka history. Things happened that made us who we are. We stumbled, scratched our knees, got up, let the wound scab, and tried again. We met joys and sorrows. Perhaps our history extends back through the ages as well. Where does the path of causation that unfolds as each plant, bug, animal, bird, us, begin? Bodhidharma's One-Mind Precepts states, "Self-Nature is inconceivably wondrous." Our nature that right now hears, feels and thinks, that gets hungry and eats, tired and sleeps is wondrous. A cut bleeds then heals. A sandwich becomes a thought, a symphony, a heartbeat, a fiber of

muscle. Inconceivably wondrous Self-Nature is who we are. Like the ground beneath us it has always been right here.

At his moment of final challenge the Buddha touched the Earth. He didn't reach toward the sky and beg for help from above. He didn't fall for Mara's metaphor, try to win the debate, and out-argue the Distracter. He touched the always present, selfless, sat on, trod on ground and asked the Earth to testify for him. Her humble, solid response confirms him and overwhelms doubt. What builds solid ground beneath us is the work we do now. Roshi Kapleau used to say, "If you don't let the Dharma down, the Dharma will never let you down." No effort is wasted.

What makes it such a lovely story is that it's not simply ancient history. It's our story, too. This moment is part of the ongoing jataka series of the un-fully-realized Buddhas we each are. Essential nature, Mind itself, the ground beneath us, is always here. Past lives, past thoughts, decisions and events led to this present one in which we sit, walk, stand, speak, eat, work, worry, create, pick our noses. Come day's end, we say "good night," and lie down on the ground of our nature, the ground we practice from, have always been standing on whether we know it or not. This ground is always ready to testify for us, if we ask.

Our fundamental vow as human beings is to know ourselves, to know who or what we are. Zen Master Dogen famously wrote out the central realization of practice in a few words: "When the self advances to become one with the 10,000 things it is called delusion. When the 10,000 things advance and confirm the self it is called enlightenment."

The ten thousand things are birds, bugs, clouds, mountains, rivers, people, animals, trees, traffic sounds, cell phones, raindrops, pebbles, clumps of earth, bright morning stars. Ordinary things confirm us, tell us, indeed *make* us who we are everyday. There is no barrier between us, and a single thing. Enlightenment is intimacy. Touching the Earth is always possible because the ground is never far away.

